

# New Wells for Old, and a Nine-Year-Old

THE two books about which London at this moment is talking are Wells's *Undying Fire* and Miss Ashford's *Young Visitors*. These books London has quite definitely selected in a way that London has, and although often enough London's selection may seem from the point of view of High Art and Literature very bad, there are always good reasons behind it. On this present occasion High Art and Literature may rest satisfied—they are not disgraced.

It is not as though just now there was very little from which to select: during the last three weeks books have simply poured from the press. They have been for the most part novels, and I cannot think of any very interesting work in belles lettres with the exception of Robert Lynd's admirable book of essays, *Old Masters and New*, Brand Whitlock's *Belgium Under German Occupation* and Edward Shank's book of poems, *The Queen of China*.

But of novels there are May Sinclair's *Mary Oliver*, W. L. George's *Blind Alley*, Gilbert Cannan's *Pink Roses*, Miss Delafield's *Consequences* and Joseph Hergesheimer's *Java Head*. Miss Sinclair's book is only just published, Miss Delafield and Mr. Hergesheimer have at least equalled their earlier successes, W. L. George and Gilbert Cannan are both disappointing.

Cannan's *Pink Roses* is so poor a book that it is difficult to believe that the author of *Round the Corner* wrote it. It has been attacked over here because of its subject: that seems to me the wrong view to take. If Cannan seriously believes that his knock-kneed hero who thinks of no one but himself during the war and quivers with terror at the approach of an air raid is the best type of humanity now remaining to us, let him press that point

## A London Letter From Hugh Walpole

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of view as urgently as he may. It is in construction, character, drawing, description, dialogue—everything that belongs to the art of novel writing—that the book is so disappointing, and it is quite sickly with sentimentality.

W. L. George is a more competent craftsman than Cannan. He knows in *Blind Alley* just what he wants to do, where he wishes to place every one, what he likes them to say and so on. I feel, however, that the propaganda journalism on which he has been engaged for a number of years has crept into his novel writing: his characters talk too competently, points are pushed too deliberately, the scene is coloured too opportunely. This book is really not worthy of the author of *Israel Kalisch* and *The Second Blooming*, not worthy in spirit rather than in technique and efficiency.

But Wells's *Undying Fire* and Miss Ashford's *Young Visitors* have both spirit and technique. Miss Ashford's technique is especially to be admired. Wells's book has been to myself at any rate a revelation—a revelation because I see that I have been looking during all these last years—ever since *Tono-Bungay* in fact—to Wells for all the wrong things and have been disappointed because I have not got them.

One hears now in many places complaint because Wells has become "philosophical," "religious," "argumentative." One notices how people go back again and again to those wonderful early stories—to *The In-*

*visible Man* and *The Wonderful Visit* and that epic of star-dust and moon-shine *The First Men in the Moon*. *God the Invisible King* and *The Soul of a Bishop* did seem poor substitutes for such masterpieces, but now on reading *The Undying Fire* one suddenly realizes certain things.

First, that Wells has never had the gift of creating character—that is, he has been able on several occasions to throw off very vigorous sketches and caricatures of himself—Mr. H. Kipps, Mr. Polly, Uncle Ponderevo and the rest; character-creation in the sense that Hardy and Conrad have created Worlds, in the sense that Arnold Bennett has given us the Baines women, Hilda Lessways, young Clayhanger, and Galsworthy Mrs. Pendyce and the Forsyte family, that has never been in Wells's genius.

Secondly, that Wells is a poet and that the best things that he has done have throbbed and burnt with the poetic spirit—such things as the first vision of the moon, as the last chapter of *The Time Machine*, as the end of the *Machiavelli*, as the epic fight in *Mr. Polly*, as the American scenes in *The War in the Air*, and above all in the chapters concerning death and disease in the animal world, and the life in the U-boat in this his latest book. On closing *The Undying Fire* one dimly wonders why it has been so moving and genuine, and here when the three books that preceded it seemed dull and in certain places insincere.

In those three other books there was never a glimpse of this astonish-

ing poetic descriptive evocative fire, save only the flying scenes in *Joan and Peter*. There was only the journalistic, waiting, peevish Wells who combines so untidily with the Wells of this last book. It is a beautiful and memorable work, this *Undying Fire*, the best thing that its author has done since *Tono-Bungay*.

*The Young Visitors* is Miss Ashford's first novel and she wrote it at the age of 9. Many people are saying that Barrie, who has written an introduction, is author of the whole. This book is, however, no fake, and I find it difficult to believe that any one can doubt its genuineness. No grown-up elder could combine so marvellously the child's imagination born of nothing but dreams and the child's knowledge picked up from watching visitors and reading novels. All that one can say is that Mrs. Ashford must have allowed her daughter to read more fiction at that tender age than most mothers permit their children even in these days. As I have said, the technique is admirable. Adventure follows adventure quite breathlessly—there is no time for pause. But it is in the creation of character that Miss Ashford especially excels. Mr. Salteena, her hero, is admirably done. His first note to his friend announcing his visit should become classic. He thus describes himself: "I do hope I shall enjoy myself with you. I am fond of digging in the garden and I am parshial to ladies if they are nice. I suppose it is my nature. I am not quite a gentleman but you would hardly notice it but can't be helped anyhow."

Mr. Salteena will become, I hope, part of the English language like the Mad Hatter and the Mock Turtle. His history is a delight and demands to be read aloud. London in leaping upon him so swiftly and eating up four editions of him in a month has shown most excellent sense.

## Ecce Hobo! Harry Kemp and His Light Love Lyrics

By BENJAMIN DE CASSERES.

NEXT to running a café on the Boul' Mich', in Paris, where I could entertain Gilbert K. Chesterton, Joseph Conrad, Anatole France, Blasco Ibañez and Don Marquis all at once, with a subcellar where James Huneker, Edgar Saltus, Carlo de Fornaro and myself were alone permitted to annihilate Things as They Are, I should have wished to be Jack London or Harry Kemp. The two latter knew how and when to jab their fists through circumstance and see the world on their faces.

Unique combination of play and business—almost a lost art! Jack dug his copy out of the guts of life. If he had only set everything down with the fidelity of Cellini or Casanova! But Jack got corroded with "moralic acid."—There was Herr Fafner Sadakichi Hartman (what's become of Waring since he gave us all the slip?), who was a great tramp in his day. He was to the manner born, and the café checks he left behind him were as thick as the leaves in Vallombrosa. I look upon the man who can rough it with awe, and I am sure none are fairer in the sight of the Lord.

Harry Kemp's new book, *The Passing God*, is launched in an introduction by Richard Le Gallienne, himself something

of a wanderer in his day, but essentially an aristocratic wastrel, with his bathing tub strapped to his back and his thermos bottle packed next to his portable electric radiator. He reviews Harry's life in China, London, Greenwich Village, on the Great Lakes, in Youngstown, Ohio, where he left the Pennsylvania Dutch Nirvana that had been harboring him for an eternity, and got born. He even wandered into Elbert Hubbard's net at East Aurora, and got leaving any epigrams behind (Harry is short on epigrams) was probably ordered to move on by the absorptive Fra, who endowed all poets with a fountain pen and a ticket-of-leave.

As Mr. Le Gallienne points out, it is curious that no one can ever find anything of the tramp in Harry Kemp's poetry. There is none of Richard Hovey's or Bliss Carman's Vagabondia in his pages. It is all as prim as the wording of the Eighteenth Amendment, as carefully ruled off as your income tax blank, as respectable as a house-broken butterfly. A most remarkable case of double personality.

To know Harry Kemp the man is to know something tremendously vital. He has mental and physical avoirdupois. He breathes like Thor, trumpets like Bryan, waves the leaden wand of his thought over the vasty deeps of mint juleps, where the 275 inspiration cowers, and uses a heavy stave on free verse idiots like myself. Most lovable of men, with the pose that

conceals his own inner delicate nature and veils with wild Wordsworthian accents the riddled heart of this monogamous Don Juan.

One day I tramped down Broadway with Harry—I trippingly respectable, dressed like an extreme prohibitionist; he (although the frost was on the Broadway lobster and the white flakes whirled in spiralled *vers libre*) hatless, coatless, dressed in his famous corduroy outing costume, with a blanket wrapped around his throat. He walked like a king and talked with the same originality. But I felt awed. This man could rhyme—just like Louis Untermeyer and Victor Hugo. This man had the courage of his pompadour even in wintertime. This man could sell his poetry. Everybody turned to look at Harry—"and did you once see Shelley?" Things like that are not understood in New York, I muttered to myself. *Sic transit gloria mei!*

The frenzy with which Harry announces pre-Homeric commonplaces convinces you. That he is primitive goes without saying. He has arrived at pure Adamhood through the simple ignorance of a Bunyan or a Blake. Do two and two make four? You have never felt the mystery of that fact till Harry has gouged you with it. He will announce to you the immanent, primordial, ineluctable, omni-collegiate laws of poetry as laid down by Prof. Spiekandspan with such rending gesture that you will unto your tables immediately.

That is all I know about Harry Kemp the Man, the most curious form of noise extant. Ecce Hobo!

"The Passing God" is Love. But there is an old commonplace that Love is something eternal. It has been said by no less an authority than Lillian Russell that Eros is the one immortal that doesn't pass. Debts and rum pass, but Cupid never! However, Harry has a right to his opinion. His business, it seems, is loving, and he ought to know. Or else his colossal irony o'ererrows our critical judgment. The poems in this book are light and

wholesome. Swinburne, Keats and Shelley are safe. There will be no resurrection under the Aurelian wall because of this book. And yet I liked every poem in the book—they are so short that they can be read between galleys if you are a proofreader. They lack the passion that has been lived; they are literary loves to literary sweethearts done on voluptuous brown paper. In the long poem in the volume the words are beautiful.

Harry's book is a sentimental picnic in a Bronx Park everglade.

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